

AGRARIAN RADICALISM
A Review Essay by Kathy Maher

Green, James R. *Grass Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978.

Hicks, John D. *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931.

Lipset, S. M. *Agrarian Socialism: the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1950.

Morlan, Robert L. *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955.

Ostler, Jeffrey. *Prairie Populism: the Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993.

Sharp, Paul F. *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: A Survey Showing American Parallels*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1948.

Farmers in the late nineteenth century experienced mounting frustration over the inability to control the marketing and distribution of their commodities. They sought collective solutions to strengthen their hand against the industrialists, railroad owners, bankers, and manufacturers in whom private economic power had become concentrated. These radicalized tillers of the soil organized to cooperatively market and distribute and to pressure legislatures for reform. They called for public ownership of transportation networks and utilities and were increasingly drawn to conceptions of a new society based on cooperation rather than the selfish accumulation of private wealth. These agrarian insurgents of the prairies and plains found political expression for their hopes and grievances through the grass-roots, democratic movements of nonpartisan farmers' alliances, populism, socialism, and nonpartisan leagues. These indigenous uprisings built upon strong foundations of rural social networks and radical farmers' movements dating from the early years of the American Republic.

The founding ideals of the Republic continued to fuel expectations among the populace of equal opportunity for all and special privilege for none. These ideals formed the basis of the “producerist” idea that the workers (of the soil and factories) deserved a fair share of the wealth they created, an idea that was rekindled among producers in the grip of the coercive power of monopoly capital. Farmers and others perceived a corruption of these republican values in the tactics of railroads and other large corporations to maximize their own profits at the expense of the producers. In their search for economic and political democracy farmers reached out to fellow producers in the trade and industrial unions, who shared the vision of a more egalitarian society and a desire for control over their productive lives.

While historians have largely agreed on the democratic component of the movements and on the continuity among farmers’ alliances and populist and socialist parties, debates have arisen over the causes of agrarian radicalism. These debates have focused on the economic and political causes that shaped its direction and the influence of class-consciousness and frontier conditions on its development. Consensus historians of the forties and fifties retained the assumption of earlier schools of interpretation that Americans generally were not attracted to class-based movements. This fit in with their one-unifying-theme approach that emphasized the middle-class nature of Americans united behind the capitalist system. New left, new labor, and new social historians from the sixties on applied a multi-causal approach to the reform movements and demonstrated pluralism in their investigations of political behavior within communities. They found behavior and rhetoric that was more class-based and militant than previous national focuses had revealed. Historians of the nineties further dissected the political dynamics

within states to shed light on agrarian radical political activities, reform coalitions, and third party formation.

The historiography of agrarian radicalism has reflected the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. Turner added components to the already-existing frontier mythology that saw in wilderness lands the assurance of economic independence and freedom for the American farmer. Turner's thesis states that the American character (with its traits of optimism, independence, and love of democracy) was shaped by contact with primitive conditions on the continually-advancing frontier line where social development kept beginning over again. Many historians attributed the rise of agrarian radicalism in part to this influence of the frontier, with its unstable social structures, immature economies, and fiercely-independent settlers, who were receptive to new and untraditional methods and solutions. More recent scholars, of course, have challenged this idea of the frontier, pointing out its Euro-centrism and the fact that the pioneers brought with them the seeds of their old cultures, value systems, and institutions. And certainly, inhabitants of established areas of the country had no less love for democracy than those reaching the western edge of settlement.

Turner's thesis was central to John D. Hicks's economic interpretation of American populism, a producers' movement of the 1880s and '90s that encompassed a variety of insurgent groups and a wide range of political philosophies. Historians have offered economic, political, and environmental explanations for the radicalism of prairie and plains farmers that led to the agrarian revolts of the 1880s to the 1930s. Hicks offers an economic and environmental explanation in his 1931 work, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party*. In his sympathetic account of

the growth, political struggles, and significant legacy of the Populist Party, Hicks attributes the rise of agrarian insurgency in the plains states to reactions of small farmers frustrated by the abrupt closure of the frontier. These farmers, shaped by a frontier experience that produced an independent and democratic nature, were also distressed by economic problems that resulted largely from an unfriendly environment that was subject to extreme temperatures, drought, hail, and frost. Hicks sees a progression in the programs that evolved through the Granger movement, Greenback Party, Farmers' Alliance, and People's Party, as cheap lands of the frontier disappeared and agricultural problems increased.

Hicks's interpretation was in the tradition of progressive historians, who emerged from the reform era itself. These historians characterized the movement as a conflict between the people, who advocated more democracy, and corrupt, private "interests," who were behind the high interest rates, mortgage foreclosures, and unfair railroad practices. Hicks interprets this insurgency, not as a struggle among competing classes, nor as evidence of defects in capitalism, but as an ultimately successful attempt by people united in a desire to expand democracy. Hicks explains populism as arising out of a population that grew too rapidly to adjust to changing conditions on the frontier. This population growth was a result of an economic boom fueled by the speculation of eastern financial interests. He identifies the agrarian radicals, who became populists, as those farmers in the central regions of the frontier states of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas who remained on their farms (unlike those in the western parts who left) through the subsequent agricultural decline and struggled with the severe crop losses, low prices, and debts.

Hicks stresses the democratic elements and legacies in the populist programs that advocated direct democracy, taking control of government away from the “interests,” reforms in land, transportation, and money, and loosening of traditional party ties. Hicks interprets the farmers’ aim of democratic reform as a legitimate response to revolutions in the transportation system and marketing machinery for grain and cotton that brought inefficiencies and grievances against middlemen and monopolies. He sees as other worthy reforms flexible currency, a new banking system, farm commodity support program, graduated income tax, and government ownership of the natural monopolies—railroads, telephones, and telegraphs.

This democratic reform impulse also prompted Canadian farmers across the border to demand similar cooperative and public ownership solutions. The occurrence of radical farmers’ movements in Saskatchewan and Alberta invited inevitable historical comparisons to agrarian radicalism in the United States. Paul Sharp discusses parallels between the agrarian movements in Western Canada’s prairie provinces and those in the American plains states in *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: A Survey Showing American Parallels*. His comparative approach is based on the assumption that agrarian radicalism’s development in Canada was parallel to that in the American plains states due to similar environmental (especially geographic and climatic) and economic influences. Canadian farmers reacted similarly to Americans faced with the same problems. Paul Sharp accepts Hicks’s economic interpretation with its underlying assumptions of the frontier influence and lack of class-consciousness among Americans, assumptions that remained influential through the fifties.

Sharp was influenced both by Hicks's progressive tendency to emphasize unity in support of the public interest and the post-World War II consensus historians' stress on the commitment of Americans to their fundamental institutions of capitalism and democracy. Thus, he was no more inclined than Hicks to emphasize class conflict or offer a critique of capitalism. Sharp interprets agrarian radicalism in the United States and Canada as the response by farmers to grievances inherent in commercialized agriculture—transportation, marketing, and credit problems. He disperses responsibility for the farmers' distress among natural and economic forces, the farmers themselves, and the inevitable results of the commercialization of agriculture. Sharp establishes the legitimacy of some of the farmers' grievances. But, he notes that rapid growth and changes in agriculture caused farmers to be frustrated by forces beyond anyone's control --increased costs of production, problems of marketing systems, and grain speculation.

Turner's frontier thesis also influenced Sharp, who attributes the movements toward cooperative marketing and public ownership as democratic reforms by farmers possessing a democratic frontier spirit that rejected the inequalities of society. Sharp's thesis is that Americans, who joined the land rush to the Canadian frontier toward the end of the nineteenth century, brought frontier agrarian ideas with them. These ideas mixed with Canadian and European cooperative influences (including immigrants' experiences with radical trade unionism and socialism), to produce an agrarian insurgency that paralleled farmer movements in the American Northwest. Sharp provides portraits and motivations of those moving into Canada from the American western frontier, who found another frontier experience in Canada.

In his analysis of these parallels, Sharp highlights the close relationship between western Canadian farmers' movements and similar organizations in the contiguous wheat belt of the American Northwest. Immigrant American farmers supported cooperative grain marketing associations, Canadian branches of organizations such as the Society of Equity and the Nonpartisan League, as well as democratic reforms that included direct legislation, single tax, recall of public officials, direct primaries, woman suffrage, and regulation of trusts. The conditions that drove Canadian prairie farmers in the wheat belt to radicalism were similar to those that produced the agrarian revolt in the United States—discriminatory freight rates, problems of transportation and marketing (created by geography and climate), high interest rates, insufficient capital, manipulation of prices by middlemen, and resentment of eastern financial interests.

Sharp stresses the parallels of cooperative grain-marketing associations, farmer-owned grain companies, and the importance and lasting influence of the Nonpartisan League. Its anti-monopolistic demands for nationalization of public utilities and banking and credit systems later appeared in the platform of Saskatchewan's successful Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (C.C.F.). While Sharp's approach highlights interesting parallels in the development of agrarian radicalism, it leaves unclear indigenous factors that helped produce and shape the agrarian movements in Canada. This may not be a valid criticism, since he considers his work to be "A survey showing American parallels."

The broad, national focuses of Hicks and Sharp led to generalizations that were challenged by later historians, who probed the reform forces and internal politics of states and municipalities to reveal the large role played by class interests and conflicts. S.M.

Lipset accepts Hicks's and Sharp's assumptions of the frontier component of agrarian radicalism and the essential middle-class nature of American workers and farmers in his study of the growth of a grass-roots agrarian socialist movement in rural Saskatchewan. However, Lipset describes an indigenous brand of agrarian socialism that he believes was based on a class-consciousness that grew out of conditions in western Canada that could not have existed in the United States with the pervasiveness of its American creed of classlessness and equal opportunity.

Lipset adds a discussion of class and a political dimension to the familiar economic interpretation of Hicks and Sharp in his work *Agrarian Socialism: the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan*. He relates a familiar tale of wheat-belt farmers and other small producers moving toward collectivist solutions to the problems caused by monopoly capitalism. Lipset does not deny cross-border influences, but examines conditions under which class-conscious protest movements arose and the factors that influenced their success or failure. He aims to shed light on the relationship between economic pressures and organized class action by tracing the evolution of agrarian radicalism from farmers' grievances to their successive political responses. Lipset follows farmers' expressions of dissatisfaction with the problems of the Saskatchewan wheat economy through the granges, farmers' alliances, grain growers' associations, Nonpartisan League, and the socialist experiment of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (C.C.F.), which enjoyed electoral success in rural Saskatchewan in 1944.

Lipset emphasizes that the protest movement he analyzes was democratic, indigenous, and class-based. Lipset acknowledges his own democratic socialist

sympathies and stresses the democratic nature of the movement toward socialism, stating that the C.C.F. involved more people in direct political activities than any other party in American or Canadian history. In establishing the indigenous nature, he focuses on the farmers' sense of common cause and shared grievances that contributed to class solidarity. Lipset traces the development of class-consciousness on the Canadian prairies to farmers united by common rural problems, who drew together for solidarity against the power of eastern grain brokers, bankers, and railroad companies. He notes other factors that contributed to the development of class-consciousness, such as the conflict and social separation between the farmers and the middle-class businessmen of the towns and cities, the formation of consumers' cooperatives and purchasing associations, and the Wheat Pool campaign.

Lipset contrasts the indigenous and class-conscious agrarian socialist movement in Saskatchewan with socialist movements in the United States. He makes the point that long before they had heard of socialism Saskatchewan's farmers believed they were economically oppressed and exploited by the large commercial organizations--the terminal elevators, the railroads, bankers, and grain exchanges. Lipset argues that unlike socialist leaders in the United States, C.C.F. leaders adopted an ideology that grew out of "currents already present in society." (153) He accepts the prevailing view of old-school and consensus historians that belief in the American creeds of democratic classlessness and social mobility prevented indigenous, class-conscious socialist movements from occurring in the United States. James Green and other new left and new labor historians of the sixties and seventies would challenge Lipset's claim that class differences were not recognized by Americans.

Another prevailing notion Lipset accepts is that of the frontier influence. Lipset locates the agrarian unrest among the frontier settlers, who carried a heavy burden of debt and were receptive to new ideas and solutions. He attributes agrarian unrest to the inability of Saskatchewan to develop a stable agricultural economy because of the dependence on the production and marketing of one crop—wheat. Hicks' legacy is clear in Lipset's contention that "The wheat growing and frontier areas were the most vulnerable economically, and had the newest and least-integrated social structure. These areas formed the basic core of all the movements." (11) Lipset interprets the Saskatchewan agrarian socialist experiment, the C.C.F., as arising from the same wheat-belt conditions as earlier agrarian movements—Independent, Greenback, Populist, and Nonpartisan—noting that in the United States much of the Socialist Party's vote came from the wheat-growing regions (especially Oklahoma) where populism had been strong. Later historians, like Jeffrey Ostler, would argue that agrarian radicalism was not found just in the frontier states.

Like Lipset, Robert Morlan analyzes an indigenous movement that arose among farmers who had already come to accept the need for extensive public ownership. However, he does not connect this Nonpartisan League (NPL) to frontier conditions, larger currents of thought, or a growing class-consciousness. He also does not analyze the socialist roots of this successful grass-roots farmers' revolt in North Dakota (that spilled over into Minnesota) that was unique to its time and place. Morlan stresses that although the Nonpartisan League's organizing method was important, the farmers were ready to be organized. To the traditional economic justification Morlan adds a political

explanation that includes an extensive analysis of North Dakota politics and NPL political campaigns.

This agrarian protest movement, the Nonpartisan League, was rooted in the agrarian radical tradition of North Dakota wheat farmers, who had fought grain and railroad interests for years through previous movements and with their own combination and cooperation. Born from the same injustices against farmers that sparked the alliance and populist revolts, the Nonpartisan League targeted railroads, the marketing system, and financial interests in its aim to increase the participation of farmers in the democratic process. The League was the direct outgrowth of a strong Socialist Party in North Dakota that organized farmers, who had a history of grievances against middlemen, grain buyers, and financiers, into its diverse membership of workers, small businessmen, professionals, intellectuals, and others who perceived injustice and believed in the socialist goals.

North Dakota farmers were receptive to Socialist Party planks that echoed earlier alliance and populist demands. These planks, later adopted by the Nonpartisan League platform, included state ownership of terminal elevators, flour mills, packing houses and cold-storage plants; state inspection of grain and grain dockage; exemption of farm improvements from taxation; state hail insurance on the acreage tax basis; and rural credit banks operated at cost.

In his in-depth study, *Political Prairie Fire: the Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922*, Morlan chronicles with sympathy and fairness the organization, growth, politics, tactics, wartime persecution, and lasting influence of the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota. Morlan draws a sympathetic portrait of farmers in an agricultural state increasingly radicalized, as they fought the railroads and perceived a larger percentage of profits going

to middlemen, line elevators, terminal elevators, commission houses, grain brokers, millers, and speculators. Morlan uses the testimony and experiments of Dr. Edwin Ladd, professor of chemistry and Food Commissioner of North Dakota, of the NDSU Experiment Station, to verify the farmers' grievances against grain and railroad interests and to document a marketing system rigged against the farmer. He quantifies the enormous losses in profits to farmers through inaccurate grading and weighing at elevators and through other unfair practices in the grain trade.

Reflecting a growing pluralist tendency among historians, Morlan attributes the organization's success to a variety of factors besides economic grievances and political action. These factors include its grass roots support, tight organization, break with old party politics, strong leadership, and legislative techniques. He stresses as important factors the charismatic personality of A.C. Townley, organizing tactics that used applied psychology and high-pressure salesmanship, influence of its newspaper and slogans like "We'll stick," state-wide meetings to encourage solidarity, method of financing by member dues, use of state primaries of the established political parties to place party control in the hands of voters, and economic solutions that appealed to a large segment of the population.

One of Morlan's purposes was to refute many of the charges often hurled at the NPL and to correct the record on some misconceptions about the centralization of decision-making, the extent of democratic participation, and the use of legislative caucuses and block voting. He acknowledges that the NPL did make some mistakes, such as selecting managers for state industries and involving itself in subsidiary enterprises. To the most persistent charge that the NPL program was socialist, Morlan

responds that for most farmers the purpose was reform of the marketing system to realize greater profits from farm products. Many believed that the state socialist program of public ownership--state credit facilities, state insurance systems, publicly-owned mills and elevators—was the road to improving the lot of the farmer. Morlan points out that most farmers supported the Socialist Party platform, but hoped to avoid the “socialist” label.

Socialism rekindled the sense of community and echoed the objectives of earlier farmer and populist movements with its long-term aim of a cooperative commonwealth and immediate demands of public ownership, social justice, and expanded democracy. Another region in which a grass-roots socialist movement built upon a rich tradition of agrarian insurgency was southwestern United States. Although the nature of the agrarian radicalism that developed there was different due to the particular institutions and historical development in which it took root, farmers shared goals with those in other locales. Southwestern socialism, particularly that in Oklahoma, was characterized by its ties to fundamental evangelical Protestantism and the large number of tenant farmers making up its membership.

James Green, in the tradition of new left and new labor historians of the sixties and seventies, highlights worker and farmer behavior in their communities and examines the diverse individuals and groups who contributed to the reform- era dynamics. He addresses issues of class and new left themes of the nature and success of socialist movements, struggles within over strategies of political action, and reasons for the Socialist Party’s decline. Finding class-based reform movements and a militant rank and file, Green challenges the entrenched notion that American workers and farmers

generally were not attracted to class-based movements. Green interjects a strong political dimension to his study and utilizes voter statistics to analyze the grass-roots strength, political growth and electoral base of the Socialist Party in the southwestern states of Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. In his 1978 regional analysis, *Grass Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943*, he examines the party's efforts to unite those groups who came together to resist capitalism, the indebted farmers, tenants and sharecroppers, coal miners, railroad workers, lumberjacks, and others.

Green believes the driving force behind the success of these movements was a growing class-consciousness among rural producers and militant industrial unionists, united against the "parasites" in the towns and cities. This class struggle found explanation and expression through the socialist ideas and programs. Green notes that socialist leaders added Marxist ideas and political explanations for the class struggle to the grass-roots radicalism in the local traditions of populism and religious revivalism. Green stresses that the Socialist Party was a means for the political expression of existing class conflicts that had developed in the Southwest between debtors and creditors, tenants and landlords, and workers and industrialists, as land speculators and large companies bought up acreage.

One of Green's major themes is the continuity between populism and the indigenous socialist movements in the Southwest that carried on the struggle for a cooperative commonwealth after the defeat of the Populist Party in 1896. In Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas radical antimonopoly populism produced socialistic populists, who came to focus on the class interests of producers and organized socialist movements. He notes that radical populists who understood farmers' grievances formed socialist clubs

even before the Socialist Party was founded in 1901. Although continuity existed and many populists saw in socialism a chance to continue the struggle for economic and social justice, the constituency of the two parties was not the same and the ideologies were different. Many of those groups making up populism's diversity, such as propertied elites and planters, were not attracted to the Socialist Party, while many non-populist elements, such as small farmers, tenants, railroad workers, and industrial unionists did join the party.

Green describes a variety of groups and individuals that formed the constituency of the grass roots socialist parties that sprang up in response to local issues. Membership included former populists, militant coal miners belonging to the United Mine Workers (strong socialist locals were established in coal camps during the early 1900s) and timber workers involved in industrial union movements, blacklisted American Railway union workers (who came to Oklahoma Territory as pioneers), railroad workers from machinists' and switchmen's unions, indigenous protesters converted to socialism, leftist organizers of tenant farmers, women suffragists, Christian socialists, and outside educators. Green points out that the struggle to build industrial unions of coal miners and timber workers produced a sense of class solidarity among these groups that aided the spread of socialism.

Like Morlan, Green finds many factors, besides economic, that contributed to the movements' successes, such as strong leadership and organizers, effective organizational methods, educators and speakers, newspapers, encampments that drew upon local traditions and helped build up a religious enthusiasm. Other factors specific to the region included the creation of tenant unions, and the spiritual intensity and the effectiveness of

the approaches, such as the revivalist approach with its evangelistic delivery, and the millennial vision of Texas socialists. He describes and lauds the organizers and agitators, both the professionals and the indigenous amateurs, who infused the movement with strength and vigor and worked to link local grievances to larger problems with the capitalist system.

Green challenges Lipset's contention that the creed of democratic classlessness, rural mobility, and equality of opportunity permeated American culture. He stresses the weakness of its hold in the Southwest on the landless tenant farmers trapped in the crop lien system, and the indebted small farmers and the workers to whom the realities of permanent poverty under American capitalism had become clear. Green states that Lipset's description did not explain agrarian socialism in the Southwest, the radical proponents of which propounded an ideology based upon the "Marxian doctrine of class struggle" and did make a significant impression upon a "permanently exploited" class of landless and mortgaged farmers, and workers.

As historians continued to analyze the political dynamics within states, they encountered complexities that called into question traditional economic and frontier explanations for agrarian radicalism. Jeffrey Ostler, in *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892*, challenges Hicks's economic interpretation that populism sprouted in one-crop, wheat-producing frontier states that suffered from extreme climate conditions. Hicks had asserted that populism did not take hold in states where the frontier had already passed (Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa) because farmers were under less economic stress, and received fair prices (because of proximity to markets). (6). Ostler argues that populism did

not arise simply in response to economic distress, since all farmers suffered from the deflationary economy of the late nineteenth century and economic conditions were similar in populist and non-populist areas. He also argues that populism emerged mainly out of the corn/livestock economy, and that wheat did not become the most important crop in central and western Kansas and Nebraska until after the Populist revolt. (26)

Ostler typifies the tendency of more recent historians to study political activities and electoral behavior at the state and local levels to discover the base of support for political reform and third party efforts. Ostler uses a comparative approach to examine the politics of three states in order to illuminate the important role state party systems played in populism's fortunes. This enables him to illustrate differences in political conditions that explain why populism did well in the plains states of Kansas and Nebraska but fared poorly in Iowa. He finds clues to populism's fate in state political organizations and activities, and in the relationship between the alliances and the major parties. Ostler shows the vital importance of non-economic factors, such as party competition within states, political alienation, movement organization, and ideology in shaping the course of populism.

Ostler argues that state politics generally determined whether radical farmers, who formed farmers' alliances throughout the Midwest in response to falling prices and the abuses of monopolies, pursued their aims within the two-party system or chose the third party route. Ostler suggests that strong agrarian movements occurred in most Midwestern states, but remained nonpartisan in states like Iowa where strong party competition led the Democrats and Republicans to respond favorably to agrarian reform demands (thus defusing attempts at third party formation). Ostler contrasts Kansas and

Nebraska where the dominant Republican Party's unresponsiveness to farmers' demands contributed to alienation that led to the formation of strong People's parties. Ostler points out that in Iowa, where parties were more evenly divided than in other states, two-party competition had achieved some reform (such as a good railroad law).

Through his comparison approach Ostler is able to demonstrate that party competition at the state level was an important factor in determining the major parties' responses to the Alliance and its decision to form a third party. He examines the political differences that arose in Midwestern states in the late 1880s, due to factionalism within dominant state Republican Party organizations and to the resurgence of Democratic parties, which were willing to fuse with third parties for electoral success. He notes that by the mid-1880s Democratic parties were competitive in most of the Midwestern states, except for Kansas and Nebraska, the two states whose farmers would bolt the Republican Party in favor of the People's Party in 1892. .

Ostler draws his conclusions about the primacy of political factors from the fact that economic conditions in populist eastern Kansas and Nebraska did not differ significantly from those in non-populist Iowa. Ostler forms his conclusions by studying similarities among the three states in amounts of rainfall, agricultural practices, and small amount of wheat grown, indicating that the type of agricultural economy did not seem to be a determining factor in the success of populism. He reinforces his conclusions by analyzing the proportion of indebted farmers or tenants and the percentage of farms mortgaged, the average farm value, and the variables related to the level of indebtedness.

Ostler closely examines the internal politics of the states of Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska to illustrate the role states' political environments played in shaping alliances'

development and direction. For example, in Iowa the nonpartisan Alliance successfully exerted political pressure, supporting politicians who responded to its demands and forcing conservatives to back antimonopoly measures. The Republicans were challenged by a Democratic/Greenback antimonopoly coalition and a new Iowa Farmers' Alliance, whose leadership remained opposed to the formation of a third party. Green notes that the Alliance's success at obtaining reform within the two-party system and electing men sympathetic to farmers' views diminished interest for the formation of a third party.

The crucial variable, according to Ostler, was party competition. He contrasts the politics of Kansas and Nebraska where an antimonopoly coalition failed to emerge to challenge the dominant and secure Republican Party, which faced internal battles between conservatives and antimonopolists over railroad reform legislation. In Iowa the competition between the parties fostered reform, while in Kansas and Nebraska the reform conflict was within the GOP, so the party's success was not threatened by a blow from without. In Iowa a Democratic/Greenback antimonopoly coalition forced the Republican Party to adopt reform. The Populist Party emerged in Kansas and Nebraska in 1890 because the GOP legislatures refused to enact corporate reform. Although there was evidence of radicalism at the grass roots in Iowa, Alliance leaders retained ties to the dominant Republican party and were careful to avoid "class legislation" that would appear to favor farmers.

Historians have demonstrated that these grass-roots, agrarian insurgencies took on the particular flavor and values of the culture in which they took root. Acceptance of the frontier thesis that economic and environmental conditions unique to the frontier produced agrarian radicalism led to generalizations that neglected locale-specific

influences, local and state political struggles, and other factors in the growth and success of these movements. Over-emphasis on the frontier influence assigned an inevitability to the unrest that blunted recognition of the legitimacy of farmers' grievances, problems inherent in the economic system, and the existence of class conflict. It also limited the responsibility placed on corporate monopolies and decelerated the search for political solutions. Challenging entrenched assumptions about the American creed allowed historians to include competing class interests in their analyses of political roles in the reform dynamics. The historiography of agrarian radicalism has benefited from the more recent multi-causal and pluralist approaches of scholars, whose state and local political studies have added clues to the dynamics of the reform era and broadened understanding of these complex and multi-faceted movements.